

Spinach think Popeye



Popeye illustration by Michelle Sutherland

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Popeye had it right. Eat spinach and you, too, can be invincible. Or at least that's the impression I had as a kid when he rolled up his sleeves and showed off his bulging biceps. I thought: Wow. He's so brave and strong! Then I'd clap my hands with glee when he took a swipe at Blimpy, sending him off to Kingdom Come. And I never forgot Popeye's mantra, "I yam what I yam and that's all that I yam." Thinking of this today, it seems pretty profound.

Of course this is all leading to the joy of cooking spinach, that amazing and versatile vegetable. Spinach may not have been a hot item 50 years ago but today, few homes are without this green wonder. Yet it seems that most people only use spinach in a salad. Not that a spinach salad should be frowned upon. They are great and it's easy to be inventive as spinach goes well with fruit, other vegetables, eggs, meats and any kind of dressing. But I've

come across some wonderful recipes that make for great cooked side dishes using spinach.

But first, do you know that spinach was grown in Persia (now Iran) as early as the eighth century? Although spinach loathes hot weather, the Arabs had a sophisticated irrigation system and were able to cool down the beds and keep the plots arid. Later, spinach found its way to China where it was (and still is) known as the "Persian green."

In case you're wondering, there are about 40,000 seeds in a pound and it takes 600,000 seeds to sow an acre of spinach. A pound of spinach (10-12 cups) will reduce down to about a cup and a half when cooked so it's over 80 percent water.

Eaten raw, spinach is high in vitamin A (beta-carotene),



Spiced Chickpeas and Spinach

- ¼ C oil
- 2 C chopped onion
- 4 tsp Garam Masala (see at right side)
- 2 cans chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- 1/2 tsp coarsely ground black pepper
- 1/2 tsp sea salt
- 1 large bunch spinach (10-12 oz.)
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- ½ C fresh cilantro

Heat oil in a non-stick frying pan over med-high heat. Add onions and sauté until light brown, 8-10 minutes. Add Garam Masala and stir 1 minute or until spices become fragrant. Stir in chickpeas, salt and pepper. Cook over medium heat for 3-4 minutes then add spinach and cook briefly, mixing well, until spinach is just slightly wilted. If mixture becomes dry, add a tbsp or two of water. Remove from heat, stir in lemon juice and sprinkle chopped cilantro on top.

vitamin C and folate. When it's cooked, it releases riboflavin, B6, iron, calcium and magnesium. But don't let it go to mush. The simplest (and best) way to cook spinach is to wash it thoroughly and shake off excess water. Then heat a little oil in a large pan, add liberal amounts of chopped garlic then sauté for a couple of minutes. Turn three or four times as you are cooking. It's ready as soon as the spinach gets a little limp. Don't overcook.

My sister Carmen Phinney recently served up a tasty dish made with spinach and chickpeas. She used her own Garam Masala recipe. Both are below but the wonderful thing about Garam Masala is that it can be used as a substitute for curry in just about any recipe. Try a couple of tablespoons in a stir fry of cauliflower, tomatoes and spinach. It's also wonderful sprinkled in soups, salads and sandwiches. But I digress.

Another favourite is a frittata recipe that I picked up at the Yarmouth Health Food store several years ago. It's really a giant muffin loaded with goodness (beans, feta cheese and spinach). It's totally weird and wonderful; also good hot or cold.

Without further adieu, please welcome (and try) these new spinach recipes.

(Garam Masala)

Finely grind the following together and store in an airtight jar:

- 1 tsp cardamom seeds
- 2 tsp cloves
- 2 tbsp cumin seeds
- 2 tbsp coriander seeds
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 x 3-in. cinnamon stick
- 1 tbsp black peppercorns

Spinach, Feta and Bean Frittatas

- 10 oz. of spinach, steamed and chopped
- 1 tsp nutmeg
- 5 oz feta, crumbled
- 1 15 oz can of red kidney beans, drained
- ½ bunch green onions finely chopped (or 1 small onion)
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ¼ C oil
- 5 eggs, slightly beaten
- salt and pepper
- ¾ C self-rising flour

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Lightly oil 8 large muffin tins. In a large mixing bowl, combine the spinach with nutmeg, feta, beans, onions and garlic. Stir in oil, eggs, salt, pepper and flour. Fill the tins and bake for 35-40 min. Serve hot or cold.